

A Pinch of Twain, a Dash of Wilde.

“Welcome to Gutenberg Restored. Please insert your identification card,” the blonde hologram girl cheerily instructed Alexander as he approached his office door. He pulled the blue plastic ID card out of his wallet and slipped it into the scanner slot. Immediately, the holo-secretary smiled and greeted him. “Hello Alex. You’re early today.”

Alex rolled his eyes and adjusted his messenger bag. “Yeah, don’t remind me.”

He had had a hard enough time admitting his utter lack of things to do to himself. Somehow, it felt worse to have to admit it to a non-sentient being.

“You have eight e-mails awaiting reply in your inbox. You have a meeting with Mr. Young at two. You have 36% remaining on your current project. Please call me if you need anything.”

The door slid open silently to reveal his pod: a simple chamber with an armchair and a side table. He flipped a switch on the nearest wall that caused the room to ripple until the enviroscape came into focus. He had tried for the last week to lift his melancholy mood by situating himself in a Tolkein-esque paradise when he was at work. He could afford neither his own enviroscape system nor an actual vacation, so he chose to take advantage of the company’s luxurious working quarters whenever he could. Shrugging off his messenger bag, he collapsed in the armchair and let the cool, artificial breeze wash over him. He had always been amazed at how well they were able to recreate wind, as opposed to lifeless, clammy air conditioning.

*Wow, he thought, somewhere out there, that’s somebody’s job. To create the perfect breeze.*

It sounded so poetic. Ironically, it sounded more poetic than his own job. He was supposed to be an artist, a good one at that, and yet somewhere there was an engineer who had a job far more poetic than his own.

“Pathetic,” he muttered to himself.

Alexander was a writer, a novelist as some circles preferred to coin themselves. He preferred novelist most of the time; it came with the prestige that he had actually published a full-length book and had done so successfully. He supposed it was the “successfully” part of the equation that was of most importance. With the rise of the self-publishing industry, any shmuck with a laptop and half a brain could technically call themselves a “published writer.” What really mattered were the charts. No longer could one ignore the Best-Sellers lists and critical reviews that some “artists” brushed off so flippantly. If a marketer did not take notice of your work, you were just one of millions. Somehow Alex had caught their eye. After years of writing short stories, someone had finally taken notice of him and he began to work his way up the charts. When he published his first full-length novel, it was a smash hit, receiving endless reams of praise from the press and fans alike. For the past two years, he had been surviving on royalties and appearance fees. Sooner than he realized, however, the cash was running out. His time in the limelight was fading and fast. Critics and culture reporters began to grill him in reviews and interviews, “So, what’s next?”

Of course, Alex had no clue. He had heard of this phenomenon; they called it the sophomore slump. He had won so much fame with what seemed like so little effort that the quest to top himself was excruciatingly difficult. Every time he sat down to write, he ended up spending hours staring at a blank screen until he gave up and took a nap or ate junk food to make himself feel better. His girlfriend, April, found his behavior to be childish and was not afraid to tell him as much. She didn’t understand what was “so hard” about just “doing it.” It had put a serious strain on their relationship. They were on “a break” now, which meant who knows what. She might as well have been gone in Alex’s opinion. For a while, he spent his days doing nothing but eating, napping, and playing video games. He called it relaxation but knew it really was just depression.

On one of the rare nights that his friend Wallace had managed to get him out of his uptown apartment, the two of them had settled on a bar down the block. Wallace worked as an editor and proofreader and when Alex mentioned his recent woes, he ventured, “Well, you know, it wouldn’t kill you to take a day job.”

Alex shuddered at the thought. However, three more beers in, he was willing to listen. “I could get you a job at Gutenberg. It wouldn’t be too difficult,” Wallace suggested delicately.

Alex grimaced. Gutenberg Restored was almost a dirty word in the world of writers. As the organized publishing industry began to slip away, a group of strategists were scheming away at a method to return to their former glory. The problem was this: Anyone can publish his or her own book. So who can’t? After months of deliberation, they finally arrived at a conclusion: the dead. Some of the best writers known to man had been dead for centuries. Of course, there was already a market to sell their original works, though many of them were available for free through open-source networks. But what if they could give the dead a voice once more? Years of think tanks and recruiting of the best and the brightest in computer programming had produced a program they christened Gutenberg Restored. The program was fed the complete works of thousands of famous authors, already available *gratis* in electronic format from any one of a hundred open-source libraries. They even convinced some failing estates to sell the rights to an author’s works in order to make a quick buck. The program then used complicated algorithms to pull out the author’s essence: their writing style, their use of structure, character types, influences, and a million other factors that added up to what was, essentially, that man or woman’s art. The company could then plug in a few factors such as themes or current events, tweak the machine to add more of his wit or less of his poetic language and produce a brand new work in the style of Oscar Wilde, Charles Dickens, Shakespeare or any one of hundreds of deceased geniuses. The company was able to pump out new novels by authors that had been dead for five hundred years. Some could argue, and many did, that this was in no way a true work of these masters of literature, but it did not seem to matter to the public. They ate up the novels, poems, and plays like movie theatre popcorn, by the handfuls and faster than they could even stand. Writers like Alex had often criticized Gutenberg Restored, arguing that no machine could ever replace a living, breathing artist. However, their objections often fell on deaf ears in favor of the hype and novelty. For years, he had looked down on their products as cheap imitations.

Yet, here he was, pulling out his tablet laptop and settling down in an office paid for and run by the kingpin itself. The bills had started piling up and he had chickened out. No matter how it sickened him, he had made the phone call to Wallace and found himself with a job as a proofreader and fact checker. The work was easy enough. He had been assigned a handful of authors to read up on who had releases scheduled in the near future. He would then receive the new novels and was expected to check not only for factual errors, but also for a verisimilitude between the new work and the canon. He didn’t tell anyone about his job and would never list it on any resume. It was far too embarrassing. For now, it paid the bills and let him fail as an artist in relative comfort.

Lately he had been assigned a group of Tolstoy creations. He had studied Russian literature in college and had found some solace in the fact that he was proofing an author whose work he actually enjoyed. His last assignment had been Hemmingway. *Anything* was better than Hemmingway. Despite the fact that this latest Gutenberg creation rivaled even War and Peace in length and complexity, he was making significant headway. Before he settled down to read another chapter, he opened up his e-mail. He quickly deleted messages about an enviroscape outage that didn’t affect him and an office party that he had no intention of attending. He briefly glanced over some minutes from a meeting he had been to yesterday and some office memos that he would probably ignore anyway. The last unread e-mail, however, got his attention. Perhaps it was the bright red, all-caps title that read, “SECURITY CLEARANCE UPDATE,” that made him sit up and pay attention. He looked around suspiciously,

wondering if one of his colleagues, Wallace maybe, was playing a practical joke on him. Apprehensively, he clicked on the glowing subject and began to read.

“Dear Mr. Andrew Green-“

“Seriously?!” Alex groaned. This was the third time this month that the secretary from programming had e-mail him instead of Mr. Andrew Green. He supposed he couldn’t blame her too much; their last names, Greene and Green, were only one letter away and they did share a first initial. He was about to compose a reply when a thought struck him. “What’s this clearance for anyway?”

He contemplated the ethics of the situation for a whole two seconds before reading the rest of the e-mail.

“Please find below the password for the file containing the source code. You may access this file by searching for it by name in the database. Have a nice day!”

Below was a complicated file name and passcode made up of seemingly random numbers and letters, probably to keep just anyone from stumbling across it on the database. But what did she mean by source code? The source code for what?

Suddenly it dawned on him. She meant *the* source code. He had heard Wallace mention the other day that Green was supposed to start work on some system tweaks over the next week, improving the ability of the system to customize tone and mood. Alex had never seen how the program actually worked. He simply received and edited the end product. Curiosity was slowly obtaining a stranglehold on his ability to reason. He found himself wanting desperately to take a look at the code, just to have a glimpse of what it was like. What if he was found out? Did they have a way to know?

*It would be stupid to run it here. They’d notice the data surge,* he chastised himself. Yet, he still continued to wrack his brain for a way to get a look at this magical machine that was supposed to produce art. After a good ten minutes of debate with himself, he decided to ignore it. He would e-mail the secretary later; he needed to get back to his Tolstoy.

Tolstoy could not have been duller that afternoon. Alex barely managed to eke out more than two chapters during his shift. His mind kept drifting back to the mistaken security clearance sitting in his inbox. How did they do it? How did they manage to codify genius? How did they formulize art?

Suddenly, somehow, he found himself feverishly typing in the name and passcode, desperate to know. Before he even knew what he was doing, he saw the file opening up on his tablet screen. Alex had never seen something so massive in his life. He didn’t know much about programming or coding, but it appeared to be extremely complex, accounting for thousands of minute details. This wasn’t enough though. These letters, numbers, and symbols meant nothing to a layperson like him. But, if there was one thing he remembered from his rudimentary computer science classes in high school, it was how to use a compiler. He hesitated for a moment. He knew once he opened the program there would be no going back. He could not un-see what he was about to witness. What would he do? How would it affect him? Would he lose his faith in art? Could this one little program shake him of all the confidence he ever had about the unique abilities of the human mind? He could not decide what was worse: to stop now and never know or to know and potentially ruin his life. Then a third possibility came to him: *This program could revolutionize the way I think about writing. It could fuel me, be an inspiration.*

As soon as this entered his head, he rejected all other thoughts and worries. He hastily opened up the compiler installed on his tablet and exported the code to an executable file. The mere seconds it took for the program to install seemed like ages of agony and wonder. Soon though, his screen was filled with a blue-green glow and the words, “Welcome to Gutenberg Restored,” were flashing across it in white, polished letters. He had done it. He had opened the file and now there truly was no turning back. Cautiously, he began to explore the databases. The interface was seamless, almost too user-friendly. It was frightening how easy it was to compose a new document. Within half an hour he had created a new short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald on the fate of man in the modern age. With the drag of a slider, he

added elements of J.D. Salinger and Tennessee Williams, highlighting Fitzgerald's gorgeous use of metaphor and imagery, a touch of Salinger's attitude, and Williams' character depth. It was Fitzgerald, but more like Fitzgerald-plus. Fitzgerald perfected. He read the story over and over, really appreciating the power of this program for the first time. He spent the next hour creating a new Shakespeare play and the first chapter of a novel by Dickens, each enhanced by the wit of Gaiman or the descriptive nature scenes of Thoreau. All of these authors, with their powers combined, formed super writers that took the best of all worlds.

"Wish I could just make my writing just *happen* like that," he murmured to himself. Then it hit him. Why not? What was stopping him from uploading his own work? He had seen a button on the home screen for uploading a new author. He could see it now: a pinch of Twain, a dash of Wilde...

His fingers were centimeters away from the button when he stopped short. Was he really doing this? Wasn't he, just hours ago, made sick by the thought of even working as a proofreader for this propaganda factory? Hadn't he spent numerous hours reading articles about how the company would twist the words and ideals of authors who could no longer speak for themselves to serve their own financial needs? He couldn't do this. He'd be risking not only his integrity in the business, but his personal dignity. Wasn't he an artist?

*Being an artist is no good if you're starving*, he thought to himself. He could potentially never have to work again. Every few years he could calibrate a new novel and send it out into the world. He would have instant success every time with the greatest writers in history at his side. Who knows? Maybe the public would find his work so palatable that he would be among the greats someday. He could still write short stories in the meantime, give himself an outlet for his true creativity, but to make the money he needed to live? He could leave that up to this genius machine.

"Mr. Greene? You have five minutes remaining in your shift," the voice of the holo-secretary called over the loudspeaker. Suddenly, Alex's world snapped into focus. He had to make a decision. It was now or never, sink or swim. A million clichéd phrases concerning the immediacy of his situation ran through his head. Which would he choose: artistic integrity or a life of leisure? The clock was ticking. He could not risk pulling this stunt again.

His finger covered over the button that could change his life in an instant. This was an action he could never take back if he chose to take it. He seemed to be having a lot of those today. He was inching his finger ever closer when suddenly it was as if an invisible force was holding him back. But there was no invisible force only his conscience. Had he really just been willing to sacrifice everything he had worked for? How could he have been so blind? This wasn't what he wanted. None of it was. The cheating, the silver bullet, it all felt so wrong. He couldn't do this, not any of it.

Slowly and sedately, he closed the program erasing it from his tablet entirely. He composed an email to the secretary, informing her of her mistake. He wiped the email from the tablet's memory. One minute left on the clock.

Suddenly, he opened his email client once more and composed an email to his supervisor. It took him less than thirty seconds. He had resigned.

Solemnly, he packed up his tablet and shut off the enviroscape. As the pod doors shut behind him he knew he had made the right decision. He was an artist and as long as he had a voice it would be his and his alone.